

Lived Experiences: How Is It Like To Be A Student-Athlete Of A Premier State University?

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Abstract

This study is on the lived experiences of student-athletes under a Sports Scholarship Program in a National University in a third -world country. Data was conducted through narrative interviews of six female (6) student-athletes. Results show that student-athletes perceived their lives as stressful, yet their involvement in sports satisfied the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The meaning they attribute to sport involvement enables them to endure difficult situations however, they are at risk for psychological problems with their use of a short-term and reactive coping style. Furthermore, results show that central to their identity is being an athlete. Factors that challenge this identity are present in their environment and are part of the stress that they continuously face.

Keywords: Student-athletes, lived experiences, meaning-making

Introduction

The collegiate student-athlete faces unique challenges because of multiple stressors stemming from the duality of his or her roles. Empirical studies have been done to assess stress and coping in collegiate student-athletes. However, there seem to be few studies that looked into the context of student-athlete experiences and investigated how they give meaning to their own experiences. The initial aim of this study is to look into the narratives of student-athletes to determine their perspective on what are sources of stress and how they are able to cope with these stressors. More importantly, the present study was conducted to answer “What is it like to be a student-athlete of the national university” or “What does it mean to be a student-athlete of the national university?” The underlying purpose is to investigate the dynamic interaction of cognitive processes and behavioral responses of collegiate student-athletes in response to their perceived environment.

The time in college spans the years in late teens to early adulthood, when individuals are faced with the psychosocial challenge of “Ego identity vs. Role Confusion” in their first few years and later on, with the challenge of “Intimacy vs. isolation”, as Erickson (1964) posits. It is a transition period from adolescence into early adulthood. It is also the time that personality traits are said to become more stable, leading into adulthood (McAdams & Olson, 2010). According to McAdams & Olson (2010), research shows that the primary goals of young adults such as college students are education, intimacy, friendship and career. For students, being in college means more autonomy as well as more responsibility. Much research has been done on stress and coping among college students and most evidence shows that the transition period from high school to college is among the stressful points in life (Brougham et. al, 2009; Misra & McKean, 2000; Pritchard et. al, 2010).

A subset of the collegiate population is the Student-athletes, individuals with the dual responsibility of being a student and representing the school in athletic competitions. “Student- athletes are a sub-culture” (eds. Kissinger & Miller, 2009). They face unique challenges in performing dual roles. Gayles and Baker (2015) elucidated the uniqueness of the collegiate student-athlete:

“Student-athletes represent a special population of college students that experience adjustment and adaption challenges like their non-athlete peers as well as challenges balancing participation in college sport with academic responsibilities and social life. They are distinct from the general student population because they must learn to balance the athletic, academic, and social demands of the college experience. Nonetheless, student-athletes are expected to make gains in student learning and personal development during the college years in ways similar to their non-athlete peers.

Part of the uniqueness of student-athletes’ circumstance is the preparation for and the experience of athletic competition. The experience of competition presents a unique opportunity for each athlete to validate oneself against a

challenge- one that is physical, mental, and emotional in nature- on a continuous basis. In Hans Selye's General Adaptation Syndrome (G.A.S.), an individual adapts to imposed stress and develops coping mechanisms that ensure one's survival (1950). Based on this, the frequent encounters with situations that are taxing to the physical and psychological resources of the individual should result in a holistically developed athlete- one with a "sound mind in a sound body". Following the G.A.S., the physical stress that athletes experience on a daily basis in training would lead them to physical adaptation while the psychological stress they encounter will, theoretically, lead them to better coping ability and mental toughness.

Simons, Van Rheenen, & Covington (1999) point out that "Participation in college sports has the potential to facilitate the development of skills that are transferrable to other domains such as identity, multicultural, moral, and cognitive, and leadership development". It also has the potential to foster leadership development (Wright & Co'te', 2003). Gales and Baker (2015) point out that "participation in college sports facilitates bonding with peers (for example, teammates) that can reduce feelings of isolation and stress as well as ease the social adjustment to college life." In addition to this, Western studies have found that "participation in college sports is a great opportunity for students to form relationships and practice effective communication with people unlike themselves as a result of the high level of diversity within and across teams" (Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001; Pascarella, Bohr, Nora, & Terenzini, 1995; Toma, Wolf-Wendel, & Morphew, 2001). Sporting competitions are venues for experiences that can potentially have a significant impact on an individual's well-being (Taylor & Wilson, 2005). Perusing the self-reports of the world's greatest athletes on their best and worst performances, one will find intense accounts of singular moments etched in their memories (Hanin, 2003). In the same degree, committed training for competition involves experiences that can shape an individual's character (Hanin, 2000).

However, sport participation at the collegiate level does not always yield positive outcomes. Because of the intense psychological demands that come with competition, athletes can be even more at risk for maladaptive behaviors such as eating disorders, anxiety disorders, body dysmorphic disorders, substance abuse, etc. that lead to more psychological problems than the general population (Hausenblaus & Downs, 2001; Yang et.al, 2007).

Perusing through studies on student-athletes, one would often come across the word "Stress". Hans Selye defined "stressors" as "the factor/agent that triggers the "stress" response. He went out of his way to emphasize that the stressor may be physical (e.g. cold and heat), chemical (e.g. formalin and ether), or , psychologic in nature." (Szbo, Tache. Somogyi, 2012) Selye came up with the "General Adaptation Syndrome" which emphasized that any agent noxious to the tissues (a stressor) would produce more or less the same orchestrated physiological defense (stress reaction) (Lazarus, 1991). The GAS also explains that stress response is necessary for the body to adapt and overcome the challenges to its survival. The

experience of overwhelming, stress, however, has adverse effects- physically and psychologically. (McArdle, Katch & Katch, 1996)

A study compared the sources of stress in college student-athletes and non-athletes in the US, using questions adapted from The Survey of Recent Life Experiences developed by Kohn, Lafreniere, and Gurevich (1990). Participants were asked to rate how much 57 events were a part of their lives in the past month on a scale from 1= not at all part of my life to 4 = very much part of my life. Results showed that athletes differed in a variety of ways from their non-athlete counterparts. Student-athletes reported more stress than did non-athletes in variables that dealt with conflicts with a boyfriend's or girlfriend's family ($t(359) = 2.53, p < .05$), having a lot of responsibilities ($t(357) = 1.96, p < .05$) not getting enough time for sleep ($t(357) = 1.98, p < .05$), and having heavy demands from extracurricular activities ($t(359) = 8.81, p < .001$) (Wilson & Pritchard, 2005).

Cosh and Tully (2015) looked at Stressors, coping, and support mechanisms for student-athletes combining elite sport and tertiary education and the implications of these for practice. Results from their qualitative study reveal that stressors reported by student -athletes engaged in elite-level sport had four overarching themes namely: scheduling, fatigue, coaches, and financial concerns. One of the key findings in this study was that coaches were a major source of stress for the research participants especially when these coaches were inflexible around training schedules.

Other studies on stress in student-athletes focused on its impact which could be physical, psychological, or social in nature. The impact of stress includes the occurrence of physical injury. In 1983, Passer and Sees used a modified version of the Life Experiences Survey (LES) to examine the relationship between positive and negative life changes and subsequent athletic injury among 104 collegiate varsity football players drawn from two teams. The findings indicated that players who incurred significant time-loss injury had experienced greater negative—but not positive—life changes in the previous twelve months than non-injured players. This suggests that life changes which can be a source of stress were related to the occurrence of injuries in the participants.

These studies give evidence on the different impact sport participation at the collegiate level has on an individual. Meanwhile, central to the current investigation is the student-athlete and her ability for cognitive appraisal and effective of coping amidst the multiple stressors that come with dual roles.

Contextual Background

This study was conducted among student-athletes in a national university in a third-world country. In this setting, academic standards for admission is the highest in the nation. Acceptance to the national university meant that a student obtained a weighted average ranked in the top five percent of applicants from the whole country. However, to address the need for athletic representation, the national university created a special program to admit talented students based on their athletic ability, by-passing the stringent academic admission requirements. As

pointed out by Hodes, James, Martin, and Milliner (2015) in a study postulating a collaborative model to support student-athletes, most student-athletes come to college ill-prepared for the academic demands of tertiary education. In this context, there is a potential gap created by the high academic standards and the actual academic aptitude of student-athletes who were admitted through non-academic standards. While sports programs in universities exist in settings in more advanced countries, studies have been conducted that have led to the formation of support programs for student-athletes in such settings.

In the United States, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is committed to ensuring the “well-being and life-long success of student-athletes” and has come up with a host of programs such as the “NCAA Life Skills”-“a well-known collaboration between NCAA national office, the 1,200 member institutions, the affiliate organizations and conference offices. It is committed to the total development of student-athletes, preparing them with “life skills” that are useful throughout the college experience and after graduation.” (“What is the NCAA”, n.d.)

Meanwhile, in Europe, there exists the European Athlete Student Networks whose aim is “to support European athletes in combining high-performance sport and education.” (“About EAS”, n.d.). The EAS Network has ongoing programs in different European countries under the Erasmus Plus projects (Foerster, 2020)

In the current context, studies on student-athletes in tertiary-level education are scarce. Programs based on research to address the needs of student-athletes, including academic support is lacking. This research aims to present empirical evidence on the experience of student-athletes to provide one of the bases to establish a program for student-athlete support.

Theoretical Background

Lazarus & Folkman (1984) came up with the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping and tackled the aspect of psychological stress: “Psychological stress is defined as “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being.”

In the same model, they defined coping as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

In context, the appraisal is a salient component of how one enters a state of stress and how one copes with stress. Along these lines, this study pursued to look at the “appraisal” ability and subsequent coping strategy of student-athletes in a national university. This is cognizant of the concept that the cognitive processes involved in appraisal are a crucial factor in the kind of coping employed. This cognitive process, in turn, is influenced by the individual’s value system, beliefs, and emotional state.

Central to this investigation is the individual and his/ her view of his experiences. Aligned with the Social Cognitive Theory, this comes with the idea that people are sentient agents, or pro-active beings. According to Bandura (1999).

“People are self-organizing, proactive, self-reflecting, and self-regulating, not just reactive organisms shaped and shepherded by external events. People have the power to influence their own actions to produce certain results. The capacity to exercise control over one’s thought processes, motivation, affect, and action operates through mechanisms. of personal agency.” (p.2)

Through the Social-Cognitive Perspective, the current study looks into “triadic reciprocal causation” which involves a dynamic interplay among personal determinants, behavior, and environmental influences. (Bandura, 1986). Therefore, in this investigation, the researcher takes into consideration the active role of the student-athletes in making sense of their experiences given the context of their situation: dealing with the challenges of being admitted in an institution with high academic standards through non-academic qualifications and coping accordingly.

Methodology

Research Design

To answer the research questions, the main method employed for looking at the lived experiences of student-athletes use of in-depth interviews, adapting the model of the narrative by McAdams (1985). In McAdams’ Life story model of identity, experiences from young adolescence and adulthood are examined. According to this model, narratives make it possible for an individual to make sense of experiences in order to cope with and consider individual differences. As Singer and Salovey (1993) emphasized, a narrative will enable a participant to “identify self-defining memories as a representation of vivid and emotionally intense events in one’s life that reflect recurrent life concerns”. The results of this study indeed contain narratives that reflected defined peak moments and low points in the lives of the participants, allowing me, as a researcher to see a glimpse of what was important to them and what affected them the most. Through this method, the participants were given a form of empowerment that was helpful in answering the research question regarding their lives as student-athletes- what were their moments of difficulties, and what were their moments of joy? In-depth interviews that allowed the participants to share their personal narratives were also appropriate in looking at what student-athletes value through their own interpretation of the events that happened in their lives as student-athletes in a national university.

Participants and Sampling

Six female student-athletes were recruited, via a purposive sampling method, to participate in the study. For purposes of representation, the researcher

recruited the six student-athletes for each of the criteria: experience in the team (team captain and rookie), role in the team (key player and reserved player), and type of sport played (Team and Individual). The participants were recruited from a population of 592 student-athletes enrolled in the national university at the time of the data collection.

Research Method

The current study was done as part of the Graduate requirements of the author. Consultation with academic advisors in the Graduate Program on the method was done and approval was obtained to proceed. A Research Ethics Committee was yet to be established in the institution that the author was a part of. Hence, the approval and recommendation of Academic Advisers served as a checkpoint to ensure that the method employed by the author followed the guidelines set forth by the Declaration of Helsinki on the Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Subjects. (World Medical Association general assembly, 2000).

Preliminary Procedures

As the student-athletes were in a Sports Program in the University, the director of the said program was consulted for the study. As a courtesy and as part of the protocol, the Director's cooperation was obtained to engage the participants. Recruitment for participants ensued through advertisements in the University and through student-athlete online networks. Six females were then recruited. For each of the participants, a schedule at their convenience was arranged.

The narrative interviews were conducted within the University grounds, proximal to the student-athletes' training venue. These were locations conducive for the participants to share their experiences without any fear of being overheard and open areas around the university gymnasium where the participants felt at ease in telling their stories.

It was necessary to ensure that the participants were at ease. Though the researcher was a member of the faculty handling student-athletes and had some degree of familiarity with the participants, efforts were done to make them comfortable to share their stories. Participants were assured that their participation was purely voluntary, and they were free to refuse or discontinue participation at any time. Participants were also assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time if they felt uncomfortable and that in no way would their participation have any impact on their academic standing. For each participant, a briefing was conducted prior to the narrative interview to explain the background of the study. Participants were informed that they would be asked to share their stories regarding their experiences as student-athletes as part of the study.

On obtaining Informed Consent and Consent for Audio-recording

The researcher asked the participant to sign two copies of an Informed Consent form. Each of the participants were asked if they would allow the

proceedings to be audio-recorded. All participants agreed to have the interview session audio-recorded. The participants were encouraged to speak in either English or the national dialect.

Conducting the Narrative Interviews

The interview started with the question, “how did you become a student-athlete in this national university?” They then shared the different ways they became part of the Varsity Sports Program. The researcher then led them to tell their story by asking them: “What is it like to be a student-athlete?” The participants determined the direction and flow of the conversation. At certain points, the researcher clarified some things and asked other relevant questions. It is important to note that most of the participants of this study were very open in telling their stories. While some became emotional in recalling some of their negative experiences, some of them expressed that they felt some form of relief and even euphoria, after being able to tell their stories. After the interviews, the majority of the participants expressed positive emotions such as gratitude, pride and excitement. In ending the sessions, the researcher noted how the story-telling would wind down and the participants would have a long pause to ponder on what he or she had related. At this point the researcher would ask if there was anything else they wished to share. And as closing note, the participants would be asked if they could sum up their experiences and answer one last question: “For you, what does being a student-athlete in the national university mean?” or “What does it mean to be a student-athlete of the national university.” Their responses to this were the final note of their narrative. After each interview, the researcher thanked the participant for their time and their willingness to share their stories.

Analysis of Data

After the narrative interviews, the audio recording was transcribed. All of the participants agreed to have the conversation audio-recorded. There was approximately a total of 7 hours’ worth of audio recordings from the 6 participants. After initial transcription, the text was reviewed and the sections which were unclear and incoherent were marked and verified. Each transcript was read in whole, including notes for the interview that was not audio-recorded. When all the transcripts were completed, a formal analysis of each one was done. A categorical-content reading was conducted. Here, the focus was on the “content of the complete story” (Lieblich, Tuva-Mashuach, and Zilber, 1998).

For the initial analysis, Each narrative was re-read in full. Then the answers to the research questions from the narrative were extracted. The narratives, in general answer the question: “How is it like to be a student-athlete in a national university Also, for each narrative transcript, the researcher searched for responses that answered the question: “What did being a student-athlete of the national university mean?” After examining each of the six transcripts individually, the researcher made a summary for each narrative based on his/ her own initial impression of the narrative.

For the secondary analysis, the responses of the twelve participants to each research question were extracted from the transcripts and collated. For each research question, the responses were analyzed and classified according to similarities in themes. These themes were then identified, labeled and defined to answer the research question.

To provide an external check of the process of data analysis, the help of a colleague with the appropriate credentials was enlisted. The co-rater held a Graduate degree in Sports Science specializing in Sport Psychology and had done research in the field of Sports and Exercise Psychology. The transcripts for the narrative interviews were made available to the co-rater for analysis and thematic classification. The researcher and the co-rater discussed individual analyses and thereafter, agreed to merge particular sub-themes under several main themes.

A final list of themes was drawn up, answering the main question: “What is it like to be a student-athlete in the national university?” or “What did it mean to be a student-athlete of the national university?”

Results

The objective of this study is to explore what it is like to be a student-athlete in a premier state university based on the perspective of the student-athletes themselves. In this study, the perspective of women student-athletes will be presented.

Below is a short profile of the six female student-athletes who participated in this study.

Bea was a senior student on the Volleyball team. She got into the University through academic merit. From being the least skilled in blocking and spiking, she became one of the best players. In her 4th year, as she was in the running to be the MVP and looking at a spot in the National Team, she got injured in the middle of the season. She eventually came back to play for the University. In the classroom, she always wanted to prove that the negative stereotype against student-athletes is not true. Bea graduated summa cum laude from her bachelor's degree.

Penny was a 4th-year student from the football team who got in through the sports scholarship program. She was from the province and had difficulty adjusting to city life. As a student-athlete, what affected her very deeply was when she was not lined up for the premier league during the year that the women's football team won the championship title after a long time. She admits that how she fared in her sport greatly affected her performance in her academics, as well. Penny believes she is a student before she is an athlete. She knows that her football career will end after college but her education from the university will take her even further.

Espie is a graduating student and team captain of her team. She got into the University through academic merit. Espie is a Film Major, and she claims that as a student-athlete, there are times when she needed to choose whether she wanted to be a good athlete or a good Film Maker because she needed to invest time in

both. Espie believes that being an athlete is a factor in being a good student and a being a successful person in life because of all the challenges athletes are able to experience. She says being a student-athlete of the University is a privilege and one was prove oneself every day.

Bernie is from one of the Champion teams of the University. She was recruited even before she graduated from high school. Bernie's experience as a student-athlete is full of challenges. She is one of the student-athletes who have been burned-out. She says that in her first year, her doctor advised her a week of rest for being over-fatigued. She says during that time, she did not even want to see the court and did not want to play at all anymore. She felt that she felt trapped because Badminton seemed to take over her whole life. Bernie reported that she "lost love for the sport". But when she was captain, they won the Championship for the premier league but after the season, she said she turned to her studies and sought it out as a means to relieve her stress from her Sport. Bernie says being a student-athlete of the University is very difficult. It is emotionally and physically demanding. She says student-athletes need to find their own "light" and have a heart to survive. Nevertheless, she is proud to be a student-athlete because she has learned and experienced strengthening herself in the real world.

Agnes is a 5th-ear student. She is from the fencing team. She entered through the sports scholarship program. She had been training with the Fencing team since she was in high school. Agnes was lined up to compete in her first year. She said she was a serious athlete and trained really hard. She was not prepared; however, with how difficult handling her academic subjects would be. Her status was Delinquent because of her grades at the end of her first year. Despite this, the greatest challenge that she has as a student-athlete was dealing with her Coach. Agnes experienced high amount of stress in her third year as she failed to catch up with her academics because of the high demand in training. The lack of consideration from her coach, her perception of his favoritism and lack of professionalism compounded her psychological stress so much so that her hair began to fall off. She tried to attend to her studies but had to take time off from training. This led her to be cut from the team She claims that she worked hard as an athlete, but she felt undervalued.

Lena is a graduating student \She is a Track & Field athlete. She got in through the Sports Scholarship Program. She tried out for the Women's basketball team and got accepted. She passed up a chance in another school to be in the University. Lena's experience as part of the Basketball team had a negative impact on her. She was not a priority as an athlete because she was in Team B . Because of this, she said she lost the drive to train, and she fell into vices such as drinking and smoking. She says she had never felt so bad as when her ability and her identity as an athlete weew questioned. She found her second chance when decided to train with the Track and Field sprinters. She felt herself improving and when she regained her confidence as an athlete, the other aspects of her life improved as well. Her new coach and her new team became her second family. In her second year as a track and field athlete, she was so dedicated that her coach appointed her as the

Female Team Captain over all other female athletes who have been with the team originally. For Lena, being an athlete is very much part of her identity. When she failed in sports, it affected her academics. She says that being a student-athlete is wrought with challenges but overcoming it all will give a sense of fulfillment. She says that everything that happens is because {the University } never made it easy for them but she knows she can do everything after she graduates from {the University}. She is proud to be a scholar representing the University.

How is it like to be a student-athlete in a national university?

The main research question is “How is it like to be a student-athlete in a national university?” Based on their narratives, two main themes emerged: Being a Student-Athlete as their Identity and Being a Student-Athlete as a source of challenge and experience.

Being a student-athlete as part of their Identity

For the first theme, the responses showed that being a student-athlete is part of the identity of those in the Sports Program who were part of this study. Their responses included (1) taking pride in being a student-athlete, (2) Recognizing the Impact of others, (3) Challenging stereotypes. (4) Embracing being a Student-athlete as their true identity.

Taking Pride in Being A Student-Athlete.

Each of the respondents expressed that they were proud to be part of the Varsity Teams and of representing the national university. “Bernie” said “ *I am proud to be a student-athlete of {University} because of what I learned in strengthening - a taste of the real world*”. Lena expounded that: “*Being an athlete is very much part of my identity. When I fail in Sports, it will eventually affect my academics.*” On one hand, “Penny” believed that she was a student first before she was an athlete. But when she was deeply affected when she was cut from the team, she eventually realized that being able to play was primary to her. The narratives showed that student-athletes felt proud of representing the University, their ability to do so had an impact on them. “Lena” explains that “ *the world of athletes is totally different and takes pride in being able to do both academics and sport. There is pride in being an athlete and when it is questioned, it affects one negatively;*”

Recognizing the Impact of Others.

This sub-theme reflected the concept of shared identity characteristic of Filipino psychology. Their responses on the Impact of others showed how their sense of self included those who matter to them-the shared inner-self which exemplifies the concept of *Kapwa*. “*Kapwa*”, a core concept in Sikolohiyang Pilipino, is defined as “a shared identity , an inner self shared with others” (Enriquez, 1992) “In Filipino, *kapwa* is the unity of self and “others” (Enriquez, 1992) . Participants mentioned the value of having people to support them, having a network and not forgetting those who helped them along the way. Student-athletes

claimed their name and those around them who are important to them formed part of their identity as well.

“Agnes” shared that her negative experience with her coach had a great effect on her. “ *The relationship between a coach and an athlete is very important in sport. It can make you and also break you. In my case, I felt undervalued when I got cut from the team and it affected me deeply.*

“Lena” on the other hand shares how her coach in Track & Field, inspired her :

“You just want to do what is expected of you. I really trust him. Cause he knows my potential even before. I know my potential and he never gave up on me. Even though I was like 30 in 200m. That was my time 30seconds. And then others would hit 28, 27. He wouldn’t give up on me. And I just want to do what was expected of me, to make him proud.

Meanwhile, “Espie” shared that her team also has a big impact on her. She considers her team as a family and what happens to her team mates also affects her as well. Apart from the members of the team, “Bea” also shares that being part of a bigger community makes an imprint on you. “ *I feel happy to be part of the volleyball community -their presence and support helps me on my journey as an athlete.*”

Challenging Stereotypes

These responses pointed out that part of the student-athlete experience was dealing with and sometimes, correcting the stereotypes of being “dumb jocks”. Based on the narratives, the student-athletes perceived that usually, the stereotype associated with them was negative. This general opinion appeared to distinguish student-athletes from other students in the University even more. It seemed from the interviews that student-athletes were always out to prove something because they were student-athletes. “Espie” shared:

“One of the challenges I gave myself as a student-athlete is that I will not only excel in sports but in my academics, too. I said to myself I would like it that I would even “carry” my other classmates who are not student-athletes in projects so that I can prove to them and to myself that my being an athlete is a big factor why I am a good student.”

“Bernie” also narrated an experience in one of the General Education classes. :

“I had classmates who will look at you a certain way knowing you are a student-athlete. And you feel that they look down on you and you feel degraded but there are also some who come to know you and are surprised at how you can balance school and sport training. Some would still judge you and conclude that you won’t be able to help with group work. I personally made it a point to prove to them that the negative stereotype of student-athletes is not true at all by giving extra effort”.

Embracing the Student-Athlete Identity

One statement from the respondents showed how they embrace their student-athlete identity: “*{The University}! That in itself carries weight! I am a student-athlete of {the University} If I am asked, that is really who I am- a student-athlete of { the University}. That’s who I am. If you take that away from me, I am nothing, I am no one. It is as if I do not have any worth. I would not know who I am.*”

Espie also talked about gratefulness for her status *in saying:*

“Being an Athlete is a factor for being a good student and a successful person in life because of all the challenges you were able to experience. You have to prove yourself every day, being in {the University} is something we should be grateful for”.

On the other hand, “Agnes” realized that accepting the reality of being a student-athlete also meant handling responsibilities from both equally demanding roles. She said “*it comes with knowing the consequences of focusing on one aspect more than the other and trying to find a balance was important*” to stay in *{the University}*.

Being a student-athlete at the National University as a source of challenge and experience.

Finally, it was found that being a student-athlete of UP was a source of challenges and experiences. They shared the (1) difficulty of being a student-athlete, (2) the negative and positive experiences they went through, and more importantly, (3) the valuable lessons they learned through their experiences.

Difficulty of Being a Student-athlete

The participants consistently verbalized that being a student was not easy. “Espie” also said that being a student-athlete sometimes meant choosing between fulfilling your academic responsibilities or honing your skill as an athlete- because these two were very demanding in terms of time and effort. “*Here in the University, you can’t just focus on training, you really need to study!*” Meanwhile, “Penny” mentioned how being a student-athlete from the province, moving to Manila, and having to manage the expectations of her family while trying to perform both in school and in her sport was very challenging. She emphasized “*For me, my performance in my sport affects my performance in my academics but I believe that I am a student first before I am an athlete.*” She also mentioned that in a state-run University, the lack of financial support made things even more difficult. “Bernie” captured this quite well in saying “*It’s hard to be a student-athlete in the University. It is emotionally and physically demanding. You have to be strong.*” She said this when she recounted the days that she was trying to manage her feeling of burnout in the middle of their competition season while being the Team Captain.

In their narrative, the challenges that they encountered were quite numerous and were from different sources and at different levels. Some were on

the physical level, social , psychological, and financial levels which further supported the statements of the difficulty of being student-athletes in this particular University.

Negative and Positive Experiences

Based on the narratives, in general, the life of a student-athlete was quite difficult. Aside from this pervading thought, results also showed that being a student-athlete gave you both negative and positive experiences that non-athletes may not have access to. Three of the 6 student-athletes shared their negative experiences. "Bernie" shared her experience with burnout.

"It was during my freshman year, I didn't know what was happening to me, After our competition season, I was over-fatigued, and the doctor advised me to take a one-week break. Then when I came back to the court, I didn't feel happy, unlike before. I didn't want to see the court. Just seeing it made me want to throw up. One of my teammates shared the same feeling- the court felt like a cage. That's how I felt- there was no more fun, or enjoyment, And all the love I felt for my sport seemed to have disappeared."

Lena shared a particularly negative experience:

"I would just not go the training anymore, because I don't wanna see the coaches like I don't know but maybe just me, I really don't like them because they were not really good coaches to me. Like they don't care about the well-being of an athlete. And there are times I would hide from my coach my previous coach in the women's bathroom because I don't wanna see him. I didn't wanna see him. And then, I really had a falling out. I didn't know what to do. My grades are already affected you know like I don't wanna study. All I wanted to do is forget about it and then this one time I was already in Track (team), but you know the effects were still there. I had drunk late at night, and I crashed my car, I crashed it into a truck. "

On the other hand, the narratives also contained the accounts of the respondents regarding their positive experiences which they believe, would not have been possible if they were ordinary students. These included their anticipation to perform well during their sport season. It was evident that competing in their sport elicited positive emotions such as excitement, joy, and pride. Participants also expressed gratitude for the opportunities that became accessible to them because they were part of the Varsity Team.

Lena shared: *"The world of athletes is totally different. I take pride in being able to do both academics and sports. It's a one-of-a-kind experience that may only come once in our lives."*

Penny's story also talked about her positive experience with her coaches *"Being a student-athlete means you learn a lot every day, especially from your*

Coach not only in the field but in life” This points out that nurturing relationships were part of the positive experience that participants derived from being a student-athlete.

Espie savored her experience as a student-athlete in sharing:

“I cannot exchange my experiences in being part of my team for anything. And my experience here in the university where you drive your own life. You don’t follow anyone and you’re accountable for your own.”

Learning from Experiences

It was also evident, that each of the interviewees was able to learn something out of all the experiences they shared. Throughout their narratives, they repeatedly mentioned the lessons they learned from their failures, their disappointments, and from their losses. There were responses that were on the values, the attitudes, and the outlooks in life they developed from all their experiences.

Lena shared her musings on why she was with the Varsity:

“Yeah, why am I doing this? I still ask myself even though I know the answer, like why am I running these 450 meters? The coach wants 59 times, he wants 59 times. That’s 300 350, 59 times. Okay, so good luck. Fulfilling. And to be part of this community, you know, it’s really different. People would say “The life of athletes are really different, huh?” Like, they won’t understand. But if I talk to my fellow athletes who really get how it is to be part of this community and to be part of this community who’s representing the national university, I really love this university.”

Another one shared what they learned in terms of coping: *“It’s just a matter of “making-up ” - you make up for your shortcomings for academics and it will never be a level playing field for both aspects, it will never be on the same level. It will always be like that, but you have to like to compensate for what, you know, what you get to recover. You have to “make -up for what you lack for the other. “*

Espie summed it up at the end of her story:

“Being a student-athlete : it’s difficult, it’s challenging but you can say it is what makes you up as a person. It is one of the main factors why I can envision myself to be successful - it’s because I was able to experience all these challenges as a student-athlete”.

From the narratives of the participants, it can be seen that student-athletes perceived that they had a lot of challenges. These challenges are unique to them and their recognition of this seemed to contribute to their sense of identity as student-athletes. It is important to note that their sense of identity included the people who mattered to them-their coaches, their teammates, and their families. One important finding from the narratives was that the participants were able to

process their experiences-both positive and negative- to derive meaning from them and obtain life lessons. It seemed that despite the overwhelming stress of being a student-athlete, the impact of the positive highlights of their unique experiences outweighed the negative aspects.

Discussion

The Identity of the Student-Athlete

Despite numerous challenges-fatigue, internal struggles, and a perceived lack of organizational support, most student-athletes persevere. While there are some who unfortunately, have lost their love for their sport and have quit training due to burnout, a majority still continue to face their challenges every day and find all the stress worth it, just to be able to play for the university. Because in reality, being able to play is at the core of who they are.

Being an Athlete is central to their identity. One thing that was evident in their narratives was that their concept of identity was anchored in being student-athletes. An identity “is a group of traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is.” (Leary and Tangney, 2012). It is sometimes used synonymously with the term self-concept, a cognitive structure that can include content, attitudes, or evaluative judgments and is used to make sense of the world, focuses attention on one's goals, and protect one's sense of basic worth (Oyserman & Markus, 1998).

Meanwhile, social identity is defined as “ that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his/ her knowledge of his/ her membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.” (Tajfel, 1978). In this study, Student-athletes take pride in identifying themselves with UP. The privilege of carrying the name of the premier state university had an impact on them that bolstered their pride in themselves. Aside from carrying it in competition, they seem to carry being a student-athlete in UP like a badge of honor. They feel it is a double feat- surviving in the university not just as an ordinary student but as one having dual roles.

More Athlete than Student

For most participants, their identity was defined by their being a student-athlete. Their statements revealed a dimension of their self-concept affected by the sport and life experience, relations with other people and by involvement in sports activities (Cornelius, 1995) known as “Athletic identity.” Athletic identity (AI) is a concept that describes the degree of strength and exclusivity with which a person identifies with the role of an athlete (Brewer, 1990; Brewer et al., 1991). Putting things in perspective, Tusak, Faganel, and Bednarik (2005) said that: “ Athletic identity is a part of self-identity that enables value and meaning of taking a part in exercise and competing.

Athletic identity can be defined also as a cognitive structure or self-concept (Markus, 1977), that “guides and organizes the processing of information,

concerning the self.” Yukhymenko-Lescroart (2014) surmised that it is possible that some student-athletes may identify themselves as students in one situation and as athletes in the other. Depending on the primary role student-athletes invest themselves in, they may identify as either student-athletes or athlete-students. In the University, most of those interviewed in this study attest that they take to heart being both a student and an athlete, however, some of their responses show that they do value the athlete side of themselves more.

Based on Erikson’s Psychosocial Stages (1964), some of these athletes are at an age when the challenge is to find a sense of Identity and avoid having Identity Diffusion. Finding one’s “sense of self” is a prerequisite to moving on to the next stage of overcoming “Intimacy vs Isolation to foster stable and meaningful relationships. Pinkerton, Hinz, and Barrow (1989) cited a study by Nelson (1981) who applied Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development in counseling freshman student-athletes. In Pinkerton et al’s article (1989), it was explained that one of the factors contributing to psychological problems in student-athletes was identity conflict. Nelson’s study (1981) supported this in describing the psychological challenge of student-athletes transitioning from high school to college. In high school, student-athletes enjoyed acceptance and recognition from their peers, friends, and family in support of their efforts in sport. “The college environment is very different and less supportive from those which athletes previously encountered. As they progress up the athletic ladder, athletes are under greater pressure to perform.”

In context, it is at their age in college that student-athletes see themselves as even more distinct than other students. While they are trying to establish their identity, their experiences may present conflicts to that idea of themselves. On one hand, they know that they are athletes and that is at the core of them. Yet, when they came into UP through the Varsity Sports Program, their orientation was that they were students first before they were athletes. Resolving the internal conflict arising from these two different orientations is what they deal with and this manifests in their actions and their way of coping in stressful situations.

Challenges to their Self-Concept.

Being a student of the University came with the expectation of performing well academically. As for those who entered the University below the academic standard through the sports scholarship program, this appeared to put pressure on them as they struggled to meet these expectations while fulfilling another role.

While this perceived expectation could serve as a challenge and a motivating factor, their adjustment into an institution with high academic standards needs facilitation, especially when they were accepted with different standards of admission through the sports scholarship program. The challenge of adjusting to college life is compounded by the drastic adjustment to academic standards made even more complicated by the intensity of training for sport competition. The lack of adequate guidance or assistance to integrate into this kind of system seems to be

one of the problems that student-athletes deal with that makes their search for identity and their ability to relate to others much harder.

When they experience failure or find themselves unable to cope with the multitude of adversities- within and outside of them, the narratives show that they start to question their own abilities. When their identity is anchored on being an athlete and when they are unable to play in the premier league because they could not pass their academic subjects, they feel helpless and feel that nothing is within their control. These negative emotions manifest in their behavior not only in training but also in their academic responsibilities.

In class, things get more complicated as the requirements pile up and they need to cope. Their self-concept is once again challenged. This kind of stress may lead to maladaptive coping behaviors which compound the problem until it becomes a negative cycle of stress that can lead to burn-out or worse psychological problems. As it is, not having been adequately prepared for the magnitude of academic responsibility of being a student-athlete in the University seem to contribute to this distressing reality.

While some of them are able to cope, there are other student-athletes who dropout or stop playing sports altogether. For those who were able to surpass adversities and moved on to adjust, even with much difficulty, they hold on to their identity as student-athletes because owning it is costing them so much time and effort.

In Defense of Their Sense of Self

The results of the study showed that part of their self-concept is associated with the prestige of representing the University. This was common with all of the participants as they all mentioned it throughout their narratives. The difficulty of their day-to-day challenges and knowing what it takes for them to stay in the University seemed to have built-in their minds the idea of a “warrior” in a battlefield, defending a title- consistent with their competitive spirit. Part of this “battle” is against the negative stereotypes against them. They have been challenging the negative stereotype that had been unfairly assigned to Varsity players, trying to prove that student-athletes are not simply dumb jocks. They talked about efforts to change the negative perception through a move to change the “laid-back” culture of the teams, associated with negative attitudes towards and poor performance in academics.

Some studies found student-athletes do not always have poorer academic performance than their counterparts (Wilson and Pritchard,2005) but Student-athletes continue to have the negative stereotype to deal with. Engstrom and Sedlacek (1991) surveyed 239 freshman students and found that students perceived student-athletes negatively when it comes to academic performance. Participants of Engstrom and Sedlacek’s study were found to be worried over having a student-athlete assigned as a lab partner and were suspicious and less trusting of student-athletes getting a grade of A in class. The student-athletes in this study had the same experiences of being at the receiving end of such behaviors.

Jameson, Diehl, and Danso (2007) found that negative stereotypes can affect athletes' intellectual performance in college. Experiences of discrimination and being stereotyped brought about negative emotions in the participants of this study. However, in contrast to the previous study, these negative perceptions of them served as their motivation to strive to perform well in academics.

Results showed that the development of their sense of identity is closely linked to being an athlete. Their experiences in competition, the sense of competence they acquire from it, has shaped their self-perception. They see themselves as always having to perform well.

In context, their experiences of discrimination in the classroom and the assignment of a negative stereotype against them are seen as another challenge that they need to overcome. In this sense, they strive to behave in a way that will change this perception so that it may correspond to how they wish to see themselves.

As in the other aspects of their lives as student-athletes, they perceive everything as a challenge that they have to overcome, in the very same way that they struggle to win their sports competitions. Their sense of identity- their athletic identity governs how they perceive and respond to the world around them. In all contexts- in the classroom, in the field, among their peers, the student-athlete projects himself/ herself in relation to his/ her sense of identity- an athlete who performs well on and off the playing field, a contender who pushes on despite the odds and ultimately, with their competitive spirit- a "winner" in life and not only in sport.

Reality versus Expectation: The Struggle for Congruence

The lived experiences of student-athletes provide a rich ground for them to grow and develop into fully functioning individuals. Each of them has the capacity for great achievement in the things that they are passionate about. However, realizing their full potential is not possible without a conducive environment for reflection in order for them to process their experiences and make meaning out of them. With their tight schedules, over-all-fatigue, and lack of intentional facilitation of this necessary processing, it has been difficult to achieve this. Consequently, they may not have had the opportunity to evaluate how they have been coping and gauge if it has been effective.

Based on the findings of this study, their true selves lie in the athlete part of them. This is what they really value the most, as this is where they derive the most positive emotions that give them a sense of self-competence, consistent with their self-concept. However, the reality is that for most of them, in order to continue to be an athlete, it is necessary to be a student. It just so happens that they are a student of the premier state University in the country known for its standard of academic excellence and this makes things complicated.

In the University, the recognized measure of competence is academic excellence. In truth, achievement in any other field seems insignificant or secondary. Sport is simply not a priority and the accomplishments of athletes do not really get the merit that achievements in the academic arenas are accorded.

That is simply the way things are. In the University, Academics are more important than anything else. Knowing that most student-athletes did not qualify through the academic standards already stigmatizes them, even before they demonstrate their skills. With this status quo, what they do in sports will not be recognized in lieu of academic performance.

Meanwhile, the student-athlete whose skills and competence lie in sport needs to conform to this standard and therefore, is expected to perform in academics as well. In orienting them to be students first before being athletes, they find themselves beset with challenges that they are not totally equipped to handle. Maybe it is the same for all student-athletes in the country but knowing how high the academic standards of this University are, this scenario is a set-up that increases the probability of student-athletes failing. The large gap between reality versus expectation inadvertently puts pressure on the student-athlete who is expected to perform dual roles, both at a higher level than they were initially prepared for. This is the stress that they carry and what drives them to cope in whatever way they can in order to survive. There is the looming question of their competence-if they deserve to be in the University, if they are really good enough to be here. Can they really be both student and athlete and excel in both fields?

Given their limitations, given the lack of perceived support this task is really very difficult. And yet student-athletes strive to fulfill the expectations while burning themselves out in the process. Some of them succeed, others just try to simply survive. It appears the expectation of student-athletes, one that they have imbibed, puts their sense of identity in conflict. This conflict seems to cost them their psychological health and hinders them from achieving their full potential as individuals.

Carl Rogers' Humanistic Psychology believed that humans have one basic motive, which is the tendency to self-actualize - i.e., to fulfill one's potential and achieve the highest level of being human (1959). Furthermore, Rogers (1959) posits that to attain self-actualization, one must be in a state of congruence, where the "ideal self" (i.e., who they would like to be) is congruent with their actual behavior (self-image).

Conclusion

Most student-athletes struggle to find congruence. There is an intrinsic desire to be excellent in what they do and in what they love. In this journey, they recognize their limitations and their strengths and make sense of their own identity. As a means of coping, they align themselves with the concept of the student-athlete and try to give equal importance to their Academic and Athletic Performance. In accepting their dual roles, sometimes the effect of their positive experiences cancels out those of their negative experience, and sometimes they don't. The findings show that they are always trying to find a sense of equilibrium just to survive. In reality, being an athlete seems to be more important to student-athletes. They will do anything so that they can be an athlete. But in their current situation, they have to be students first before they are athletes. By the standards of the

University, they may not be as good students as they are athletes. They strive to be good students and good athletes but sometimes they fail because it is really a difficult task to be both. They accept the challenges and what it takes to be this ideal student-athlete of the University. But from their point of view, The University is making it hard for them to do their job because what they do as athletes does not seem to be as important as academics.

In essence, this conflict makes it exceptionally difficult for student-athletes to find congruence and consequently, achieve their full potential as human beings. Though they have the capacity for reflection and making meaning out of their experiences, it seems to be important to them to be in an environment that fosters acceptance and support, so they can be themselves- Athletes who are students in the University. The narratives show they believe they are athletes above all, but they take pride in being students at the University. Despite all their limitations, they will continue to strive to be student-athletes because that is expected of them and that is what it takes for them to be able to do what they are passionate about- to compete in their sport. They will persist in this task until they graduate, at risk for exhaustion and psychological problems because of stress. Yet, with sheer will, they will prevail and survive because they see themselves as fighters, individuals who will never give up, despite adversity. That is how they cope to find temporary, short-term relief from stress and attempt to find congruence in the conflict between expectations and their perceived reality.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it seems that the best way to address the issues raised on the plight of student-athletes is acceptance and empathy. Accepting them as they are, acknowledging their limitations and recognize their strengths is the first step to helping and understanding them. They are trying to fit into a mold that may not be truly them and asking them to do it without the necessary skills to actually do so, presents an unrealistic expectation for them. Their struggle to meet it and the stress they endure puts them at risk for mental health problems. The perspective on student-athlete population has to change and this requires a large, coordinated effort of the whole University community most especially those in the Sports Program. The results also show that a program of support that will respond to the needs of the student-athletes in a holistic way is also recommended. This includes psychological support and counseling, and academic support among others. Furthermore, assessment and evaluation of the current sports program is recommended to ascertain the area of improvement that will enhance the experience of student-athletes in the University toward their health and well-being.

In this country, research on student athletes is limited. It is recommended that more studies be pursued in order to look into the motives and experiences of student-athletes at different developmental stages, taking into consideration the culture and perspective of sports in this particular society. The perspective of administrators and coaches should also be taken into consideration when looking

into the student-athlete experience. Furthermore, Studies on stress and coping in the context of dual roles are also recommended.

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